

Job quality in European employment policy: one step forward, two steps back?

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Abstract

This article analyses the development and use of the concept “job quality” in the European Union’s (EU) employment policy. Using a set of complementary public policy theories, it presents an analysis of how both political and conceptual factors contributed to failing to achieve any significant progress in articulating job quality in the EU’s policy objectives and guidelines. Conceptual clarity in defining what job quality is (and what it is not), from whose perspective it should be considered, and which direction of change indicates improvement, are vital pre-requisites for an effective integration of job quality into the EU’s employment strategy and into the elaboration of any successful social indicator. A constant political struggle between different actors at the EU level, and a need to reconcile the often-contradictory views of the social partners, precluded a completion of this first step. Instead, attempts to include job quality into the policy formulation process were made without simultaneously adapting the overall narrative, which continued to give prominence to flexibility and de-regulation. The outcome has been a rather cursory and inconsistent effort to implement policies and actions aimed at boosting job quality.

Key words

Job quality; quality of employment; European employment policy; European Employment Strategy; European Semester; flexicurity; Pillar of Social Rights

Introduction

Ever since the Lisbon Strategy raised the profile of employment policy within the European Union (EU) by explicitly stating that its aim is to sustain “economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (European Council, 2000), the expression ‘more and better jobs’ has become more of a rhetorical catchphrase of European employment and social policy rather than a policy of substance. In practice, both EU institutions and individual governments have prioritised the quantity of jobs – as measured by the rate of unemployment, or the rate of participation in the labour market – above the quality of jobs (Muñoz de Bustillo, Fernández-Macías, Antón, et al., 2011; Raveaud, 2007). Despite institutional and academic efforts, the quality of jobs remains a contested concept, which has not sufficiently penetrated policymaking at the EU level.

Studies on this issue mainly focus on the role of ideas and actors in the process of policy formulation (Burchell et al., 2014), as well as on the balance between economic and social goals shaped by institutional and political developments (Souto-Otero, 2017; Streeck, 1995). We seek to deepen knowledge in this area by expanding the existing discussion towards the role and impact of statistical indicators of job quality in the EU employment policy. In short, we argue that indicators play a key role in the formulation and assessment of policy problems, which tend to be ignored if they are not measured. Moreover, indicators represent a necessary element of the EU’s governance in the area of employment that relies on goals, benchmarks and targets, *none of which can be monitored, evaluated or sanctioned without appropriate indicators*. Theoretically, we propose an analytical framework that integrates agenda-setting and public policy research (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; Kingdon, 1995), with an EU-focused analysis of social policy formulation (De la Porte and Pochet, 2012; Streeck, 1995).

The contribution of this paper lies in examining reasons for the lack of effective progress observed thus far in the development of job quality indicators capable of guiding European social and employment policies. We first review institutional perspectives of job quality in the context of the current policy debate within the EU with the objective of explaining why the issue remains on the political backburner. In this context, we consider how job quality has been framed as a social policy problem in the evolving EU employment strategy, and how its measurement has been defined and redefined. We then address the question to what extent proposed definitions and indicators of job quality have been driving policy making at the EU level. To what extent has job quality been included in EU governance and what impact has it had so far? To this aim, we undertake an extensive document analysis of EU publications and policy debates, focussing particularly on the role of the European Commission, central to driving EU policy in this area. We conclude by identifying the principal political and methodological shortcomings that have hindered progress on job quality within the EU’s employment policy.

Overall, we show how a complex concept such as job quality has been defined and operationalised in the EU’s policy making process. The policy impact of any job quality indicator depends not only on the methodological quality and data availability, but also on the power relations between the actors involved. Job quality remains highly contested and

contentious as it is viewed differently depending on whose perspective it is evaluated from. In particular, we point to constant contradictory pressures from different sides of the social partners' negotiation table, as well as to the tension between the social and economic surveillance within EU institutions. The flexicurity narrative, which has re-entered the EU's employment policy, and which merges seemingly incompatible calls for better quality of work with labour market deregulation, is used to illustrate this point. We conclude by arguing that conceptual clarity and practical operationalization are vital pre-requisites for including job quality in any employment strategy that the EU may put forward in the future.

Articulating and measuring job quality in the EU employment policy

We argue, in this paper, that our core question as to why progress towards better jobs in Europe has been so slow and so unpredictable, can be at least partially understood from a consideration of theories of public policy. Many institutions and actors may have started their involvement in this process with a simple rational-choice approach, believing that the path to better jobs could be achieved by careful measurement and careful conceptual analysis of the roles of the various levers to be employed – regulation, trade unions, EU institutions, etc. This theory of rationalism in public policy making might have worked with other less political and less divisive policy objectives, but cannot explain the route so far to define job quality, and will probably be an even worse description of the way ahead. We are not advocating replacing this approach with one grand theory, but perhaps several theories can each explain a part of the process.

For instance, another useful public policy theoretical framework posits that many public and social policy processes are better described as a process of “incrementalism”, also referred to as “punctuated equilibriums” (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). The reasons for cycles of change and retrenchment can be varied as some policy priorities suddenly override others. In the case of job quality, for instance, it could be argued that slow progress is often undermined by socio-economic crises in the EU, such as the credit crunch crisis, the Euro crisis, and more recently Brexit – in each case, the urgent trumping the important.

A further useful theoretical contribution in the study of public policy is known as “group models” or “subsystems theory”. According to these theories, we should not be looking for simple, unfragmented paths but rather recognise the ability of think-tanks, political groupings, pressure groups, researchers and scholars to set agendas and change policy (Heclo, 1977). As the number of actors increases, so too does the complexity of the possibilities for informal and dynamic alliances. Kingdon (1995) goes beyond this and suggests that given the number of different ways to define problems and the nature of competition between politicians jockeying for advantage, along with the vagaries of the policy process, the sheer number of possible directions of travel yield a process that can be more accurately described as “organised anarchy” (referred to elsewhere as the “garbage can model”) (see also Béland and Petersen, 2017).

In this process of policy development, many aspects interact with one another in complex, non-linear ways. Policy problems are identified by actors and ideas take the form of

contested problem definitions. Actors then formulate potential policy alternatives to address these problems, which are not always coherent. Concrete policy decisions are then framed and brokered in a process which is shaped by the balance of power between actors. This article will illustrate just how well this theory fits with the concept of job quality and its ongoing redefinition.

Finally, earlier research on the open method of coordination (De la Porte and Pochet, 2012) and EU social policy (Copeland and Daly, 2018; Streeck, 1995) indicate that the presence of agreed and concise indicators is necessary for raising the profile of social issues and increasing the likelihood of any corrective action, just as in the macro-economic public policy sphere. Thus, any employment strategy needs to be underpinned by indicators, if rhetoric and discourse are to be turned into actions. In this article, we review the extent to which this was the case since the Lisbon strategy until the European Pillar of Social Rights, considering that statistical indicators are a powerful aspect of problem definition and monitoring, which have a significant impact on policy debates. If indicators, however, are ambiguous, policy responses also end up being framed in ambiguous way, open to interpretation and discussion by various actors.

As this article argues, the development of job quality indicators and the conceptual articulation of job quality in the EU employment policy are thus closely interlinked. Since the launch of the Lisbon strategy, efforts to put job quality high on the policy agenda stimulated efforts to come up with a suitable methodology for its measurement. Progress in the area of measurement, in turn, provided policy makers with working definitions of job quality, allowing for the formulation of more specific policy recommendations in this area.

Applying these lenses of public policy theory to the EU's process of attempting to improve job quality provides a good way of understanding what has happened in the past, as well as a more realistic understanding of what to expect in the future. In the following section, we therefore review some of the milestones in the articulation and measurement of job quality in the EU employment policy, considering to what extent these processes have been successful and what impediments were encountered.

Post-Lisbon 'more and better jobs' agenda

The promotion of good working conditions and provision of social security have long been core elements of the European social model and a basis of democratic welfare states. In fact, implicitly, the quality of jobs has always been an integral part of EU policy. Already the Treaty of Rome, the founding treaty of the European Economic Community (EEC) signed in 1957, articulated the specific objective of improving the living and working conditions of its citizens.

However, employment policy was historically left to individual Member States. It was not until 1997 that the first European Employment Strategy (EES) was launched with the aim of improving labour market outcomes by coordinating employment policy between member states (see Van Rie and Marx, 2012). The quality of work was shortly after institutionalised

as one of the EU's central policy objectives in the Lisbon Treaty of 2000, with the goal of achieving "sustainable economic growth with more *and* better jobs" (European Commission, 2001). Despite the conceptual weakness of the job quality dimension in the Lisbon strategy, the European Council meeting in Laeken in 2001 agreed on a portfolio of indicators to monitor the progress towards the principles of the employment policy agenda set in Lisbon (European Parliament, 2009).

The Laeken indicators were presented at the time as a political breakthrough (European Commission, 2001) and they certainly helped to introduce a multidimensional concept of job quality into the EU policy discourse. However, due to multiple and well-documented weaknesses (see e.g. Bothfeld and Leschke, 2012; Davoine et al., 2008; Dieckhoff and Gallie, 2007; Muñoz de Bustillo, Fernández-Macías, Esteve, et al., 2011; Peña-Casas, 2009; Piasna et al., 2017) this impact was limited and short-lived. The Laeken indicators were not suitable for setting goals, benchmarks or targets, nor assessing the implementation and impact of the policy recommendations in the area of job quality. In short, they were not suitable for the governance mode of the EU employment policy and failed to produce an open method of coordination that requires appropriate social indicators (de la Porte and Pochet, 2012).

Subsequent initiatives seeking to improve the Laeken proposal (e.g. European Commission, 2008) replicated many of the initial weaknesses, resulting in a disorganized aggregation of variables describing jobs, individual attitudes, policies, participation rates and various forms of distributional inequalities. Furthermore, the question of *quality for whom?* remained unresolved. Actors involved in the job quality debate within the EU employment policy represented divergent views on what constitutes desired aspects of jobs, with wages and non-standard contracts among the most contentious issues.

In parallel to the Laeken indicators, major stakeholders closely linked to the EU, including UNECE, ILO, Eurostat and Eurofound, joined forces to elaborate a broader, multidimensional conceptual framework for the comparative measurement of the quality of employment, bringing together elements of the ILO's decent work and of the EU's quality of work concepts (UNECE/ILO/Eurostat, 2007). The process leading to a publication of a statistical framework for measuring the quality of employment took 15 years (UNECE, 2015), demonstrating difficulty of a compromise between institutional actors and policy agendas. However, this statistical framework represented a complex statistical toolbox, and not a monitoring tool linked to any particular policy. It provided measurements on a very broad range of job, employment or social protection features, without any value judgments about what is considered "high quality" or "low quality" employment. Such a toolbox character precluded any international policy leverage, with countries free to pick and choose items that they find relevant or coinciding with current national political agenda.

Post-2008 stagnation in articulating job quality at the policy level

The process of limited progress was then punctuated by the economic downturn of the late-2000s (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005); a period characterised by budgetary austerity and

deregulatory reforms. The EU policy focus shifted towards 'flexicurity' (European Commission, 2007), and the Europe 2020 strategy from 2010 (the successor of the Lisbon Strategy) expressed only a marginal focus on job quality. 'Social devaluation' (Degryse and Pochet, 2018) was taken as a route to restoring job growth and competitiveness of European economy.

The renewed commitment of the EU Commission to flexicurity policy took a form of an encompassing strategy for balancing the expectations of economic growth, full employment and social cohesion. At the EU level, flexicurity evolved from the emphasis on skill development and employability substituting for job security (European Commission, 2007), to the prominence given to flexibilisation and de-regulation of the employment relationship (European Commission, 2010a). Any proposal or recommendation from that period aimed at improving the situation of the EU labour market, came with a caveat that it should not limit in any way a necessary flexibility for employers, nor create barriers for business (European Commission, 2017d).

Such policies, through redefining the basic power relations between employers and workers, as well as the transfer of risks and responsibilities from employers to the workforce, created a favourable climate for employers' representatives firmly to resist any regulation encroaching on their need for a flexible and highly adaptable workforce. This can be seen in the Employment Guidelines from that period, discussed below.

After a period of stagnation, a renewed and much-anticipated attempt to produce statistical indicators relevant to the problem definition and monitoring of job quality was made by the EU's Employment Committee (EMCO), the main advisory body on employment in the European Employment Strategy (EES) framework and responsible for drafting the Employment Guidelines. In 2013, one of its two bodies, the Indicators Group announced a multidimensional and comprehensive framework measuring job quality on four dimensions, subdivided into ten further sub-dimensions with 55 indicators (European Commission, 2014). Arguably, EMCO was advised by independent academic efforts, largely emerging at that time with the support of the information provided by large-scale surveys, such as the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), the European Social Survey and the European Labour Force Survey. Prominent examples include the job quality index developed by Green and Mostafa for Eurofound (Green and Mostafa, 2012), the European Job Quality Index developed by ETUI researchers (Leschke et al., 2008; Piasna, 2017), as well as other specifications largely based on the EWCS data (e.g. Holman, 2013; Muñoz de Bustillo, Fernández-Macías, Antón, et al., 2011).

However, some of the weaknesses of the EMCO proposal were manifest and cast doubts on whether it could have had any discernible policy impact. First, several indicators referred to the population at large (e.g. early leavers from education), people not in employment altogether (e.g. inactivity due to family responsibilities) or social services (e.g. childcare coverage). Furthermore, features of jobs (e.g. temporary employment) were confused with labour market dynamics and segmentation (e.g. labour transitions from temporary to permanent employment), as well as with worker characteristics (e.g. educational attainment or computer skills). Finally, the EMCO proposal relied on multiple data sources,

many of them with infrequent and non-coinciding data gathering procedures, such as the five-yearly European Working Conditions Survey, or four-yearly Structure of Earnings Survey. This renders the updating of the index rather problematic and too infrequent to be useful in the annual cycle of EU economic and social governance.

Overall, EMCO's proposal shifted from assessing working conditions of a particular job to the flexibility of the labour market, the quality of labour supply or the social infrastructure that enables workers with caring responsibilities to participate in the labour market. The complexity and confusion precluded formulation of any clear policy recommendations and impact assessment, because heterogeneous levels of analysis require different policy responses. For instance, the inclusion of worker characteristics in the job quality policy framework is likely to produce supply-side focused policies that do not address the demand side of the labour market. When educational attainment or skill levels are included in the job quality framework, the policy responses will include upskilling or lifelong learning. Although the importance of such policies cannot be questioned, they do fail to address the lack of good quality jobs.

We find an illustration of the weaknesses created by the complexity of measurement and a lack of clarity about the subject of analysis in the Employment and Social Developments in Europe (ESDE) report (European Commission, 2014). Although it explored the developments of various job quality indicators along the dimensions proposed by EMCO, its policy conclusions did not follow from this analysis. For instance, there was a confusion in the ESDE as to whether increasing work intensity, one of the dimensions of job quality, is to be deplored as a negative development for workers' well-being or applauded as means for achieving higher productivity (European Commission, 2014: 145–146). In a similar vein, the analysis of job security was carried out predominantly from the employers', not workers', perspective. Some level of job security was expected to have a positive impact on workers' commitment, but too much of it would risk inducing shirking (European Commission, 2014: 142).

In stark contrast to the elaborate and very complex EMCO indicators, stands a very simple and brief 'Scoreboard of key employment and social indicators', released by the European Commission around the same time (Andor, 2013). The scoreboard was composed of three employment indicators (unemployment rate, youth unemployment rate, and NEETs rate) and three social indicators (gross household disposable income, risk of poverty, and income inequality). The simplicity and brevity of the scoreboard certainly contributed to its attractiveness and resulted in it being widely used in the policy monitoring and assessment process at the EU level (European Commission, 2015c and 2017c). Moreover, the scoreboard omitted, admittedly along many key labour market and social indicators, any disputable or contentious items, including any aspect of job quality. While structural features of the labour market (such as the unemployment rate) are crucial to the environment in which job quality develops, they do not, however, evaluate the quality of job characteristics. In that respect, the scoreboard was certainly a missed opportunity to insert job quality indicators into the cycle of EU policy coordination.

With some signs of labour market recovery and the installation of a new European Commission presided over by Jean-Claude Juncker in 2014, social issues re-gained some ground in the EU policy debate. The turning point in the narrative came with the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017.

The Pillar was aimed at creating convergence between Member States towards fair and good working and living conditions (see e.g. European Commission, 2017b). It was built around three areas of rights: equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion. It did not explicitly refer to job or employment quality in any of the 20 principles, but the area of fair working conditions overlaps with some aspects of job quality, by including contract types, wages, social dialogue, work-life balance, or health and safety at work (European Commission, 2017f).

The only direct reference to quality working conditions in the Pillar was in the context of promoting innovative forms of work and encouraging entrepreneurship and self-employment. Thus, the Pillar very much replicated the commitment to flexibility and adopted some of the flexicurity language, by conditioning the provision of fair and secure working arrangements on ensuring “the necessary flexibility for employers to adapt swiftly to changes in the economic context” (European Commission, 2017f). It is only the abuse, not any use, of atypical contracts leading to precarious working conditions that should be prevented, according to the Pillar. It is very likely that regulations negotiated under such ambiguously formulated policy objectives will not effectively address the issues of job quality, but admittedly the Pillar paves the way for at least some regulation on some extreme features of poor-quality employment.

The Pillar was accompanied by a new set of indicators, called the Social Scoreboard (European Commission, 2017a), which replaced the previous Scoreboard of key employment and social indicators from 2013. The indicators were intended as a central tool for monitoring convergence towards better working and living conditions, and facilitating a stronger consideration of employment and societal challenges within the European Semester (European Commission, 2017a). The Social Scoreboard consisted of three broad dimensions that correspond to the three main categories of rights from the Pillar. Interestingly, the second dimensions, in the Pillar entitled ‘Fair working conditions’, was changed in the Scoreboard to ‘Dynamic labour markets and fair working conditions’. The three dimensions are further divided into twelve areas and measured with 42 indicators in total (web version) that assess employment and social trends.

Upon closer examination, many of the indicators in fact overlap with the previous scoreboard from 2013 and also replicate the focus on job quantity and structural features of the labour market, failing to include the quality of job characteristics. Even the dimension ‘Dynamic labour markets and fair working conditions’ does not attempt to measure the quality of working conditions. On the Commission’s website, containing the full version of

the Scoreboard¹, this dimension includes labour force structure, with employment, unemployment and activity rates; labour market dynamics, with activation measures, tenure at current job and transitions from temporary to permanent employment; and income, with household income, risk of poverty and compensation of employees per hour worked. Thus, the latter variable—individual income from employment—is the only aspect of job quality included in the scoreboard.

However, it should be noted that the measurement of income did not make it into the actual policy making process, as can be observed in the Joint Employment Report in 2018 (European Commission, 2018), the first to use the scoreboard in the European Semester. In the report, the Social Scoreboard is employed selectively, with the dimension ‘Dynamic labour markets and fair working conditions’ assessed only through the employment and unemployment rates and the gross disposable income of households. In practice then, the new Social Scoreboard looks a lot like the previous scoreboard from 2013. From the perspective of measuring job quality, no effective progress can be observed.

Translating Discourse into Actions: Job Quality Indicators in the Employment Guidelines and European Semester

In the previous section we reviewed some of the key policy strategies developed at the EU level in the area of work and employment. Such strategies constitute a reference framework for the monitoring and assessment of how Member States perform. In practical terms, they frame the narrative and provide key terms and indicators used in the cycle of EU economic and social governance coordination, currently synchronised into the European Semester, which involves setting priorities, evaluating performance and outlining recommendations. This is where job quality indicators could potentially play a role. However, as we demonstrate in the following review of the evolution of socioeconomic governance in the EU, job quality has barely featured there. We argue that this is largely accounted for by weaknesses in the conceptualisation of job quality (which gives no clear indication of the direction for improvement), and a dominance of the commitment to flexibility in the policy discourse. Overall, the process described below closely resembles Kingdon’s (1995) theory of organised anarchy as multiple actors attempted to converge in the definition of the job quality problem.

The ‘more and better jobs’ objective set in Lisbon, then reasserted during the following Council meetings in Nice and Stockholm, gave job quality a prominent place among priorities for common employment policy. The Employment Guidelines of 2002 (European Commission, 2002) thus repeated the calls for improving the quality of jobs, employment and work. The guidelines also specified the areas that should be addressed in order to achieve improvement in job quality and the list entirely overlapped with the Laeken proposal, including all 10 dimensions. This was certainly an important contribution of the Laeken framework, as it provided a working definition of job quality. However, its methodological weaknesses and a lack of agreement on indicators and data side-lined job

¹ <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/social-scoreboard/>

quality in the formulation of concrete targets. Instead, the emphasis remained on full employment, flexible forms of work and lifelong learning, and the underlying assumption was that action in these areas will also bring improvements in job quality.

By the launch of the Europe 2020 strategy in 2010, job quality lost much of its momentum at the EU level. The focus was on restoring job growth and the activation of labour markets, with flexicurity principles cited as a necessary set of measures to achieve these goals. This is clearly visible in the Employment Guidelines from 2010 (European Commission, 2010b). Guideline 7 was entitled ‘Increasing labour market participation of women and men, reducing structural unemployment and ***promoting job quality*** [emphasis added]’. It stated that “[t]he quality of jobs and employment conditions should be addressed”, but without giving any details as to how this should be pursued, nor setting any targets or including indicators. The only concrete and measurable target included in the guideline was the employment rate.

Such a way of including job quality in the guidelines greatly reduced its potential impact and failed to overcome the rhetorical level. As a result, job quality was being consistently left out from the annual evaluation of the implementation of the guidelines across EU Member States. A good illustration is found in the Joint Employment Reports (JER), which are a key input into EU economic governance and every year examine the Member States’ actions in implementing their employment policy in line with the employment guidelines. The sections dedicated to Guideline 7, which includes the promotion of job quality in its title, simply kept erasing that part of the title and accordingly failed to include any issues related to job quality in the evaluation. For instance, in JER 2014 the guideline was reduced to “Increasing labour market participation” (European Commission, 2013: 18), and in JER 2015 to “Increasing labour market participation and reducing structural unemployment” (European Commission, 2015c: 32).

The launch of EMCO’s job quality indicators made its mark on the following revision of the Employment Guidelines in 2015. Its influence resembled the impact of the Laeken proposal on the earlier guidelines. The positive contribution consisted of adding content to the label ‘quality employment’ by providing a list of dimensions that should be addressed by the Member States. Thus, in line with the EMCO proposal, the guidelines recommended that quality employment “should be ensured in terms of socio-economic security, education and training opportunities, working conditions (including health and safety) and work-life balance” (European Commission, 2015b). However, a lack of specific targets or measures to be applied with the aim of boosting employment quality meant that the earlier bias towards the quantity of jobs was reproduced. The perspective of employers dominated the formulation of policies based on these Guidelines. In particular, the evaluation of the extent to which countries follow the Guidelines on improving employment quality was limited to a very simplistic assessment of labour market segmentation, which included the share of temporary employment and transition rates from temporary to permanent jobs (European Commission, 2016: 52–56). Accordingly, policy responses across Member States that were positively evaluated by the European Commission included the relaxation of employment protection legislation to ease dismissals, which translates into less job security for workers

and was found to have an adverse impact on job quality (McGovern et al., 2004; Piasna, 2018; Piasna and Myant, 2017; Rubery et al., 2016). Attention given by the report to the quality of working time was also limited to policies that increase flexibility to allow for economic adjustments and improve cost-competitiveness (European Commission, 2016: 60–61).

This links to yet another important impediment to how job quality impacts EU employment policy. The commitment of EU institutions to improving job quality was in fact rather superficial and inconsistent, often based on inserting the word ‘quality’ before ‘job’, without attention to the context and the logical meaning of the message. This is not just a suspicion but can be verified when comparing proposals for the revised guidelines with the final adopted texts. Employment Guidelines from 2015 are a good illustration of this point. Guideline 5 states:

“Member States should facilitate the creation of **quality jobs**, reduce the barriers business faces in hiring people, promote entrepreneurship and, in particular, support the creation and growth of small enterprises.” (European Commission, 2015b, emphasis added)

In this case, the word ‘quality’ was not present in the proposal (European Commission, 2015a), and was only added at a later stage, although the rest of the sentence remained essentially the same. Overall, this results in incoherent recommendations of promoting job quality through de-regulation, liberalisation and more contractual diversity (European Commission, 2017d), which contradicts the vast body of research linking such policies with poor job quality and precariousness (see overview in Rubery and Piasna, 2016).

The launch of the Pillar in 2017 with its objective of fair working conditions, raised the profile of the social dimension in the governance structure and gave the social side a stronger position in a subsequent revision of the employment guidelines. The wording of the above cited guideline was again tweaked by changing “promote entrepreneurship” to “fostering responsible entrepreneurship and genuine self-employment” (Council of the European Union, 2018: 9). While this was an important change insofar as it acknowledged that self-employment is not necessarily a route to good quality employment and may be precarious, the meaning of ‘responsible’ and ‘genuine’ was left open to interpretation, thus risking a further dilution of this guideline in the evaluation process.

Finally, the analysis of employment guidelines illustrates an important source of tension in the debate on job quality within the EU, which has significantly hindered its progress: the political struggle between pro-regulation and de-regulatory coalitions (Mailand and Arnholtz, 2015). Put differently, in terms of political priorities, the concept of job quality has had to rival for attention with the ‘flexicurity’ debate, which emerged within the EU during the mid-1990s, and had gained a firm foothold within DG Employment by 2008 (for discussion see e.g. Klindt, 2011).

Policy objectives formulated at the EU level emphasise the need to ensure flexibility for employers, encourage new forms of work and flexible work arrangements. At most, only “extreme flexibility” (European Commission, 2017e: 116) is undesirable, yet there is no clear

delineation of the boundary beyond which the “extreme” form begins. This commitment to flexibility, very much linked to flexicurity policy, distorts the processes of policy evaluation and recommendations in the area of job quality. It results in very weak and often contradictory guidelines on how to create quality jobs.

Examples of such contradictions can be found in the Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs), issued by the EU to all countries to assess the implementation of Employment Guidelines and to put forward proposals for the European Semester. For instance, Lithuania in 2011 was advised to “enhance labour market flexibility by amending its labour legislation to make it more flexible and to allow a better use of fixed-term contracts” even though the latter are commonly regarded as indicative of poor job quality (e.g. Green and Mostafa, 2012; Muñoz de Bustillo, Fernández-Macías, Antón, et al., 2011). Similarly, Poland in 2015 was given the contradictory advice that permanent employment is burdensome, costly and not attractive for employers, but that a high proportion of non-standard and weakly protected contracts may reduce the quality of available employment (European Commission and Council, 2015). We find similar inconsistencies with respect to wages, another important dimension of job quality. The CSRs for Bulgaria in 2015 and Latvia in 2016, for example, recommended wage moderation, as wage increases were considered to be distorting the labour markets and harming competitiveness. At the same time, both countries were warned about high levels of poverty.

Discussion: political and methodological shortcomings

The analysis of progress towards articulating job quality in the EU’s employment policy points to several important impediments, which have hampered the development of policy-oriented framework for the comparative measurement of job quality at the EU level.

To begin with, power imbalances between social actors and the role of dominant narrative have had the strong impact on the use of available indicators in the policy making process. While the EU socioeconomic governance assumes the mutual reinforcement and effective balancing of economic, employment and social policy (Council of the European Union, 2006: 23), in practice, this positive interaction has not always worked as intended (Zeitlin, 2007). The influence and organisation of actors in the domains of finance and employment within EU institutions have developed unevenly, resulting in an asymmetry between economic and social issues (Mailand and Arnholtz, 2015; Maricut and Puetter, 2018). The crisis of 2008 brought about a significant slowdown for social Europe and further accentuated the asymmetry in favour of the economic actors. In consequence, the EU employment policy consisted either of direct calls for more flexibility and less regulatory burdens for employers (e.g. European Commission, 2010a), or conditioned social policy measures on not imposing any constraints on employers nor obstructing the development of new (in most cases casual) forms of work (e.g. European Commission, 2017d). Even the social Pillar is built around the vision of balancing rights for workers with flexibility for employers, subjecting the former to the latter.

Furthermore, the articulation of job quality at the policy level is undoubtedly hampered by the methodological, conceptual and theoretical confusion about what job quality actually is and from whose perspective it should be considered. Our review of the EU's institutional initiatives in the area of job quality reveals the absence of a coherent theoretical framework that would inform the selection of variables and guide their meaningful interpretation. The choice of variables tends to be driven by pre-existing policy objectives and availability of data rather than by any explicit reference to social or economic theories. Many key dimensions of work quality were thus omitted, for political or practical rather than for conceptual reasons, while too many others were included in a way that precludes analytical impact (see discussion in Burchell et al., 2014; Sehnbruch et al., 2015). Thus, characteristics of labour supply were often mixed up with indicators of labour demand, and the distinction between dependent and independent variables became confused. The complexity, overly broad scope and lack of transparency are partly to blame for the limited impact of these initiatives, whether as an advocacy or policy tool (Hoffmann and Dooren, 2017; Ward, 2004). This not only hinders the formulation of concrete policy measures but may even generate conflicting recommendations, as demonstrated by the CSRs discussed above.

Another important impediment stems from the fact that the definition of job quality and the selection of facets of employment via which to measure it depend on the perspective adopted. A complex and multi-dimensional concept such as job quality can be analysed from many, often rivaling, political or ideological perspectives. The meaning attributed to job quality will be different depending on whether it is viewed from the standpoint of individual workers, families, employers or from a societal perspective. The difficulties faced by the EU institutions in their efforts to conceptualise and measure job quality, and build effective policy measures, thus stem from tensions between the different perspectives of the social partners: governments, employers and trade unions (Freistein, 2016). Whilst higher wages may be better for workers, employers would argue that they harm their cost competitiveness. Employer-led forms of work flexibility might represent unpredictability and insecurity for workers, and so on. This has led to a plethora of variables being included in job quality definitions to ensure that these different points of view are incorporated. In practice, however, such a broad scope makes these definitions impossible to operationalize.

These complex problems generate a highly problematic vicious circle: to inform political debates appropriately, evidence is needed on the respective outcomes of policies that promote job quality. Yet without a precise conceptualisation and definition of what is meant by 'job quality', we cannot inform this debate. Furthermore, without such a definition, the EU cannot propose specific guidelines for a more integrated employment policy that takes job quality into account and accords the issue the importance we think it deserves.

Conclusions

This article analysed the standing of job quality in the current EU employment policy. We considered to what extent articulation of job quality in the EU's employment policy, not only in terms of overarching principles but also concrete actions, has been successful. The analysis shows that the progress observed thus far in the development of job quality

indicators at the policy level has been hindered by conceptual confusion, a lack of a shared definition and a disagreement on how to organise a multitude of work dimensions into a coherent comparative framework of indicators. Moreover, many labour market variables are contentious and their interpretation in terms of job quality depends on from whose perspective they are evaluated. The interests of workers, employers and public policy makers often clash, as do the interests of individual human beings and free markets. This poses particular difficulties for international bodies, where any progress is based on a compromise between the interests of employers, policy makers or employees. As a result, no statistically relevant indicators that can help with the definition and monitoring of job quality have been agreed.

A policy strategy needs to be converted into concrete aims or targets so that non-compliance can be sanctioned: this is the role for indicators. But the combination of punctuated equilibriums (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005) and organised anarchy (Kingdon, 2012) have led to a failure to effectively integrate job quality in the EU employment policy process. As shown in the previous sections, job quality indicators that follow from EU policy strategies appear ambiguous and ambivalent. Therefore, the actions devised on their basis do not add up to a coherent policy capable of effectively addressing issues of poor job quality. Moreover, our analysis confirmed what previous studies noted: a dominant position of economic surveillance, or market making social policies, which use the ambiguity and confusion in job quality indicators to their advantage and submit social policy to market efficiency goals. We thus find little ideational impact of job quality indicators in the EU employment policy.

The conceptual confusion with vested political interests are real but not insurmountable. We argue that to integrate job quality analysis better into a coherent social policy framework, it is necessary to define and consider carefully what the relevant dimensions of job quality are, on which level the analysis should focus, and from whose perspective. These choices should then be applied consistently in the formulation of Employment Guidelines and their monitoring across countries (see also Piasna et al., 2017). In addition, successful indicators which have a significant impact on policy makers must not be too complex, both in terms of their methodology and the quantity of variables included (Ward, 2004).

Increasing profile of social issues on the policy agenda and balancing the input from different sides of the social partners' negotiating table are essential to counterbalancing the dominance of economic surveillance in the European Semester. The efforts to increase the importance of better working and living conditions in the EU policy together with the launch of the European Pillar of Social Rights are a much anticipated and welcomed step in this direction. However, the precedence given to flexibility and the persistence of the logic of flexicurity require that a more radical change is, of course, still needed before job quality becomes a concrete and measurable target in the EU's employment policy.

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